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# Umno vice-presidential race still wide open

**THE** Manhattan grand ballroom at the Berjaya Times Square Hotel was packed with senior Umno members on Sunday night, as incumbent Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein strolled in.

Accompanied by his entourage, Hishammuddin smiled and waved to those who occupied the more than 200 tables draped in bright red cloth.

The “Rangkaian Sahabat Muda”, or Youth Friendship Network, programme was a dinner to raise support for the defence minister’s bid to retain his party post.

At 52, Hishammuddin has aged quite gracefully. His skin is flawless, despite being weathered by the harsh political climate in the lead-up to the Umno polls. Even he did not deny that detractors were training their sights on him.

“I am aware that there are certain quarters who called me names, especially over the Lahad Datu intrusion.

“They said I was slow but little do they know the real issues. This is normal in politics. I have been through all for the past 20 years and I am not surprised by it,” he said in his speech.

No one can overlook the political prowess that Hishammuddin had developed over the years. For instance, his candidacy to defend his post was duly endorsed by Umno secretary-general Datuk Seri Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, who was present that night.

“I know I can be reprimanded for what I am going to say next but in my capacity as the Federal Territories Umno liaison committee chairman, I would like to see the incumbent to stay to ensure continuity in the party’s transformation agenda,” said Tengku Adnan.

For sometime, it had been speculated that there would be significant changes in the Umno vice-presiden-

tial line-up after calls by several quarters to rejuvenate the party so that it would remain relevant.

But Hishammuddin, along with fellow incumbents Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and Datuk Seri Mohd Shafie Apdal, were part of the party leadership who proved Umno’s resilience in the last general election by increasing its share of Malay votes.

At last month’s nomination day for the party polls, the trio came together in a show of solidarity as incumbents and announced that they had an “understanding” to defend their posts.

This, in turn, indicated that there was strong support from the grassroots to preserve the status quo. The results of the recent polls for the party wings’ top posts — where Wanita chief Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil and Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin won by huge vote margins — also point to this.

Universiti Utara Malaysia political analyst Associate Prof Dr Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, however, stressed it would be a different ball game in the contests for the vice-presidencies, as the incumbents faced popular candidates in Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir, former Malacca chief minister Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Rustam and former Negri Sembilan menteri besar Tan Sri Mohd Isa Abdul Samad.

“The contest for the party’s vice-president posts is more intense compared with the Wanita and Youth races. The incumbent vice-presidents should not feel complacent since their challengers are big names in politics. Mukhriz is an idol among the younger generation, while Ali and Isa are veterans who still command strong support from the party’s grassroots.”

The incumbents know they should not leave things to chance.

Over the past few weeks, Shafie and Zahid have been crisscrossing the country galvanising support.

Zahid, whom observers see as the strongest among the three incumbents, has a strong following, and he is hopeful these will translate into votes this Saturday. The no-nonsense home minister was welcomed with thunderous applause at gatherings in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Perak earlier this month. At the same event in Kuala Lumpur, Shafie, who is regional and rural development minister, elicited a similar reaction from party members.

But it is hard to ignore Mukhriz. Some argue that people see him as an extension of his father, former prime minister Tun Mahathir Mohamad.

Apart from undivided support from Kedah members, a party insider said Mukhriz had also received overwhelming support from the grassroots in Sabah, Pahang and several other states.

But it’s not going to be easy for Mukhriz. The outcome of the polls for the party’s three wings gave rise to speculation of a “mild boycott” against two of Mukhriz’s state executive councillors, Datuk Suraya Yaacob and Norsabrina Mohd Noor, who lost the contests for the Wanita Umno vice-chief post and Puteri vice-chief posts, respectively.

Suraya failed to secure endorsements from several divisions in Kedah, including Jerlun (of which Mukhriz is division chairman), Sungai Petani and Baling. Norsabrina suffered the same fate when the Kedah Puteri divisions of Pendang, Merbok and Sungai Petani voted against her.

Political analyst Anbumani Balan said it was unclear who led the vice-president’s race as each candidate had his own strengths and was a favourite among party members.

“Every candidate stands a chance. Whatever the outcome, Umno has made history in the country by empowering more than 146,000 delegates to chart the party’s future.”



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